

# First Lady Judge Once Was Actress

That the first woman in Maryland history to serve as a Circuit Court Judge is a Montgomery Countian is another county "first" to which all of us can point with pride..

Judge Kathryn J. Lawlor was first appointed by the governor in May 1955 to fill the vacancy created by the retirement of the chief justice and later elected to a full term on the Circuit Court in 1956.

Governor Theodore McKeldin's indorsement of her cited "her outstanding ability as an attorney, her devotion to the principles of the legal profession and the high respect in which Judge Lawlor is held in her community, County and State."

Interviewing Judge Lawlor in her chambers at the Rockville Court House, we found Her Honor to be "pretty enough to be in pictures" so we weren't too surprised when we learned that during her teens she had been.

Born in Massachusetts, she was raised in Hollywood and during her high school days played a number of parts for MGM and Fox Studios.

## **Mother Frowns**

However, her mother strongly disapproved of some of the characters her daughter was meeting in the movie world and so young Kathryn's first career came to a sudden end.

Married right after high school Mrs. Lawrence A. Lawlor followed her husband around the country as he pursued his career as one of the most active trial attorneys in the Veterans Administration.

Watching him in action developed her interest in the law and in 1933 she began her studies at the Washington College of Law at American University.

After graduation she began her second career as a member of the Legal Aid Bureau staff and later set up in private practice in Silver Spring.

## **Children Born**

Also during this period she was launched on another career with the arrival of her children, Joan on February 8, 1938, and Lawrence, on October 13, 1939.

The next decade was filled with the practice of law and the arts of motherhood.

Community interest came in the old familiar pattern that most of us have followed. "Why doesn't somebody do something," we say, and the next thing we know we are trapped into "doing something" ourselves.

Irked by a hole in the street in front of their house at 3800 Woodbine Street and the sloppy trash collection methods the Lawlors attended a meeting of the Citizens Committee of Section Five in Chevy Chase.

And just like that, Mrs. Lawlor found herself a member of the Committee and in 1948, elected secretary-treasurer.

Her entrance into politics however was a good deal less orthodox. In fact it was practically unique.

One morning early in 1950 a gentleman called and informed her that she had just been elected Democratic precinct chairman.

Mrs. Lawlor thanked him graciously and said that she appreciated the honor but that there was one small item overlooked—her party affiliation happened to be Republican!

Although she had started as a Democrat in 1933, she had switched to the GOP in 1936.

#### **Told Rep. Hyde**

Repeating this amusing incident to Rep. DeWitt Hyde later that day, Mrs. Lawlor commented that the Republicans had never asked her to do anything.

The upshot was that she ran for the County Council that year on the Republican ticket. She won.

Highlights of her two years on the Council were her successful efforts to unite the County Commissioners organizations into a State Association and convincing the Sanitary Commission to put fluoride in the water.

Mrs. Lawlor and County Manager McNayr organized the first County Commissioners convention at Ocean City, an annual event that grows larger every year.

For her part in this, she received a wrist watch from the Commissioner's Association. That and the Good Government Award of the Bethesda Junior Chamber of Commerce in 1952 helped cheer the rough years at Annapolis when she was a minority member of the State Legislature after an appointment by the governor in 1953, and a member of the House's Judiciary Committee.

Her experience here she terms "fascinating" but admits that it was frustrating to have many of her bills defeated in spite of the fact that they were good bills and necessary.

For example, her bill to reform the State Tax Commission and create a Maryland Tax Court was called "the most progressive piece of legislation" at Annapolis by the American Bar Association. In spite of this, the bill was defeated if only by a few votes simply because a member of the Minority party could not be allowed to get the credit, she feels.

#### **Fought for Court**

Also her fight for a bill creating the People's Court of Montgomery County was not won until after she had left the legislature. Her vision of a Lieutenant-Governor has yet to be fulfilled.

For these reasons, she feels strongly that a strong Minority party is necessary at Annapolis if only to give the Majority competition and keep it on its toes. Better legislation would be the result of a strong minority party, in her opinion.

The lesson learned in those difficult years was that all legislation is the result of compromise and that to gain any good at all, you sometimes have to give up most of your program. You can't force your opinion on others and you can't be arbitrary in certain matters was another lesson distilled from her bitter experiences.

However a satisfying reward for her struggles came with her appointment to the Circuit Court and the vindication of the Governor's choice by the people in 1956 when she was elected.

Although satisfying, Judge of the Circuit Court is not an easy job. In one quarter year, Judge Lawlor heard some 189 cases or hearings of varying kinds, in addition to giving a number of written and oral opinions.

#### **Heavy Caseload**

The caseload of the three Circuit Court Judges is staggering when you consider they handle everything except misdemeanors, traffic, landlord, probate and juvenile matters for a population of 350,000. Most courts have a ratio of one judge for every 50,000 population.

Not only does the Circuit Court need another Judge, in Her honor's opinion but it also needs another courtroom in order to adequately carry out its duties as appellate court for the above exceptions and its primary function as high court for domestic relations cases, including divorce and custody, felony, and civil actions where the amount involved exceeds \$500.

For Judge Lawlor, the toughest decisions are those involving custody of children where both parents are "fit" parents. Of course, in a case where one parent is obviously unfit there are no qualms but what do you do when both parents dearly love their children and are able to provide for them?

Her decision in these cases is made even more difficult because of her belief that children need the security of a stable homelife so that she will never give divided custody, that is six months with one parent and six with the other, or award one child to each parent.

Her most heartrending case was one in which four young men were convicted of stealing. The only verdict possible on the evidence was "guilty" and it had not only the defendants but the whole jury and most of the spectators in tears.

#### **Sentenced to Work**

Our Portia, in this case, after a severe lecture, bound the young men to a year's regular attendance at church and gainful employment.

Her judgment was vindicated by all four making good at their jobs and not getting into trouble anymore even after their year's probation was over.

One of the by-products of her job that Judge Lawlor enjoys most is speaking to organizations and students on court matters.



Judge Lawlor